

BATTLE OF BENTONVILLE.

The Last Battle of the War, Between
Gen. Sherman and Gen. Johnston,
March 19, 1865.

L. P. THOMAS in Atlanta Journal.

The last battle of the western army was fought at Bentonville, N. C., March 19, 1865, between General Sherman and General Joseph E. Johnston, who had again assumed command of our army.

On the 18th of April, Sherman and Johnston agreed to a truce, and it was as late as May 26th before Kirby Smith surrendered out west. Some skirmishing and small engagements occurred between detached troops belonging to our army and the enemy, which could hardly be called battles; therefore Bentonville, N. C., is named as the last battle of the western army, and it is of this hotly contested fight, between giants—our two most conspicuous and gallant officers of the western army; Sherman on the federal side and Johnston on the Confederate side, that I want to speak, as it brought face to face for the last time, these two old war veterans who had so often met each other before, on the gory field of battle. These two, who had marched and counter-marched over the desolate fields of Georgia and the Carolinas; who had so often thrown out their brave soldiery in battle lines confronting each other, were now, on the 19th day of March, 1865, to confront each other in battle array, fighting for mastery for the last time.

It is not within the scope of my knowledge, nor is it my intention to write fully of the history of this battle, as the official records will no doubt give each and all the divisions, brigades and regiments, all the honors gained that day, but to mention from personal observation some of the Confederate brigades most conspicuous in this battle, who covered themselves with glory on this fiercely contested battlefield, viz.: Stovall's and Cummings' brigades, and part of Hoke's division.

We were marching along the main road leading from Smithfield station toward Bentonville, and had just crossed a small stream. Firing could be heard in the distance, and the movements of couriers and aides rushing here and there indicated a battle on hand. We filed to the right of the road, and rapidly took position in line of battle; the Forty-second Georgia being on the right, and constituting one-half of Stovall's brigade, which had been marched and fought down to an alarmingly small number, but those who were still in line were true and tried. Our position was taken only a short distance from the main road, and now we were on the battlefield of Bentonville, where we were to fight our last battle; no time to throw up breastworks, but the boys availed themselves of time to cut down small pine limbs, which to some extent hid them from the view of the approaching enemy. The small pine trees growing at intervals apart, gave our men an opportunity to see the approaching line of battle several hundred yards from where they were hugging the ground closely, hid to some extent by the pine limbs cut from the nearby trees. It was a grand sight to see them moving on us, "Old Glory" floating in the breeze so proudly. Here they came, our skirmish line gradually giving way and falling back into our line of battle.

I never was more particular and careful in giving officers and men order to hold their fire. My orders had gone up and down my line repeatedly, instructing the men and officers to keep down—hold fire, and await a sign, or orders; even threatening those who should first disobey. 'Tis not strange then, that men who had fought 21 battles, carried out my orders to the letter.

The other day an old veteran walked into my office and asked for me—I raised up to shake his hand, for I saw at a glance that I had known him in other days, and as we were grasping hands and looking at each other in the eyes, trying to trace some remembrance of the bygone times, he said, "Colonel, I remember the last order you gave us at Bentonville: 'Attention, Forty-second Georgia, hold your fire for my orders, and when you fire, give the rebel yell!' Those who yet survive, and were present that day, can tell you how well the order was obeyed."

Well, here they came. Our line had absorbed our skirmishers, and the way was clear in front for the music of the battle to

commence—but not a gun was fired, and bravely onward the enemy marched in grand style—nearer and nearer they came. When not over forty or fifty paces from us, the order so anxiously awaited was given, and a sheet of fire blazed out from the hidden battle line of the Forty-second Georgia, that was demoralizing and fatal to the enemy. They halted, reeled and staggered, while we poured volley after volley into them, and great gaps were made in their line, as brave federals fell everywhere—their colors would rise and fall just a few feet from us, and many a gallant boy in blue is buried there in those pines, who held "Old Glory" up for a brief moment. Their battle line was driven back in grand style that day, and the arms secured from the fallen foe immediately in our front, equipped an entire regiment of our North Carolina soldiers who had inferior guns. The enemy, repulsed and forced to retreat, re-formed their battle line again, not far away.

While the battlefield was being cleared of the wounded just in front, and our boys were picking up the guns thrown down by the enemy, Major General D. H. Hill and staff rode down the line from the center, and seeing what we had done, complimented us for our work, and orders soon followed to hold ourselves in readiness to move forward. We knew what that meant, and then came the "tug of war." We were to "lead the charge." The order came, and the movement all along the line of the brigade, conforming to the right, was in splendid order, and the first line of the federals was soon in view; over which we passed without a battle, sweeping all before us—it was grand to behold—onward we moved for perhaps half a mile or so, carrying everything before us. At this point, where there were converging roads, we came to a halt, and were ordered to re-arrange our lines, which were somewhat scattered by the charge just made, and here at this point, while laying on our arms resting, for we were then informed that we had done enough that day, I saw the grandest sight I ever witnessed on the battlefield.

Hoke's division was put into the charge and bringing up the center. Resting there on the pine-covered ground as we were, the firing of small arms having ceased for a time, with only now and then the boom of cannon to remind us that the fight was still on, and yet to be decided, it was a picture that would be worthy of portrayal on canvass by some great artist; the sun was slowly sinking in the west, and the slanting rays were penetrating the green forest of small pines. All at once the enemy were confronted by Hoke's gallant and dashing division as it came sweeping over us like a whirlwind, and thus they struck the enemy, and though they battled fiercely till night came on, they were only partially successful, having penetrated the federal line and breaking it at only one point. On the next day we were looking after the dead and wounded. On the 21st Colonel R. J. Henderson, the first colonel of the Forty-second Georgia Regiment, made dragoon for gallantry on the field, was ordered to lead Cummings' brigade on the left of our line. In this charge, so highly spoken of by the general commanding, the day was won. No truer man, or more gallant officer than General Henderson ever buckled on sword in defense of the lost cause, and 'tis a pleasure for me to speak of his gallant conduct on the field of battle.

Just before his death in this city, at the residence of his son-in-law, Mr. L. J. Hill, I called on him accompanied by Colonel W. L. Calhoun. In talking over the events of the war, he said to us, "Calhoun, you and Thomas must keep my army record correct," and we promised to do so, and shook his hand for the last time. With others we accompanied his remains to Covington, Ga., shortly afterward, where they now rest.

This is what the war records show of this last charge of the war in the west, made by Colonel Henderson, Series 1, Volume 47, page 1657. In the report of General L. E. Johnston to General R. E. Lee, speaking of our combined attack on the seventeenth corps, he said Lieutenant Hardee, dispatched to that point with the reserves, met it in front with Cummings' (Georgia) brigade—the only infantry up; while cavalry directed by Lieutenant General Hampton and Major General Wheeler, was thrown upon its flanks, and by combined attacks this corps was promptly driven back. In this engagement Cum-

ings' brigade, under Colonel Henderson, and the Eighth Texas Cavalry distinguished themselves. In the latter General Hardee's son, a very promising youth of sixteen, fell mortally wounded when gallantry charging in the front rank.

Finding during the night that Schofield had reached Goldsboro and that Sherman was moving towards Cox's bridge and that all our wounded who could bear transportation had been moved, we moved to the neighborhood of Smithfield Station. General Johnston says further in same report: "We took about 15,000 men into action on the 19th—the enemy's force numbering above 20,000, and afterwards increased by 10,000 more." Then he says further on that on the 20th and 21st the whole army was before us, amounting to nearly 44,000—our losses in the three days' engagements amounted to 224 killed and 1,470 wounded, and several hundred missing. The enemy's loss was far greater than ours. General Johnston also states in conclusion that the moral effect on our army was greatly improved by our success.

General C. L. Stephenson in his report, same volume, page 1095, in speaking of our gallant Henderson, said: "I forward here with the report of Colonel R. J. Henderson, commanding Cummings' brigade. Of the action of the brigade in repulsing in conjunction with a small body of cavalry, a vastly superior force of the enemy in a serious flank movement, the brigade had not been reported to me, having been detached for some time. No encomium that I can pass upon the conduct of the brigade at this important juncture will be so expressive a recognition of its gallant behaviour as the simple statement that it received upon the field the thanks and compliments of General Johnston."

I wish I could in this article speak of other brigades and their commanders, but those who are interested in these war stories, should refer to volume 47, and they will find many interesting reports of this battle.

I now wish to mention the closing scenes and events around Bentonville on March 21st, two days after the battle. We had heavy firing again all along the line. I was selected as corps officer of the day and refer to same volume, page 1091 and 1092, Major General D. H. Hill's report. He said: "There was a great deal of heavy firing on our left line, but no attack upon my command this day. My skirmish line, under Major Thomas, as corps officer of the day, was advanced that afternoon in connection with the skirmish line of Generals Walthall and Bate, and with small loss drove the yankees from their position about Cole's house. All the buildings there were burned to prevent their further use by the yankee sharpshooters," and thus we were bringing matters to the close. That night General Hill sent out an aide for me to report to his headquarters, which I did. He and his staff were gathered around a small fire partaking of their scant supper, of which I was invited to partake. Whether I refused from the apparent scarcity of the rations, or overawed by being in the presence of an officer so superior in rank, I do not now remember, but I entered into conversation with the general and his staff officers, and was informed that an order was expected from General Johnston to move out that night and that by remaining for a short time the order would arrive, and that was true. My skirmish line covering the entire corps was gradually retired and by 2 o'clock that morning we had crossed Hannah's creek on our march to Smithfield station. This perhaps was the last skirmish line formed on this battlefield, or any other, between the forces of Sherman and Johnston, and soon thereafter, when we found ourselves encamped around Smithfield station, the reorganization and consolidation of regiments and divisions of the army took place.

Soon after the consolidation of all the commands took place General Johnston had a review of the army and once more we began to look like soldiers. I remember how he looked as he sat on his war horse. He seemed from that piercing look to give each soldier as he passed a most scrutinizing look. A few days thereafter we were moving toward Greensboro, and on that march some interesting events took place. Lee had surrendered before we reached this point, but we did not know it. A few days before reaching Greensboro, we met an old Confederate veteran; where he came from we did not

know, but he had somehow gotten the information that our army in Virginia had surrendered. His statement was disbelieved, and our general commanding ordered him under arrest. He was turned back and accompanied us on our march to Greensboro for nearly a day, but other reports coming in from different sources seemed to confirm it. He was released early in the morning with apologies.

We had many desertions, and among the officers and men there had been an alarming demoralization in all the commands. General Johnston was a strict disciplinarian, and knew that something had to be done to put his army once again in fighting trim. A court-martial had been established, and some cases of desertion were before it. A young soldier, I forget now his command, was tried for desertion and found guilty, and ordered to be executed. General Johnston was appealed to, but he only said the sentence must stand. Next morning at 7 o'clock he was to be marched out, and the detail from his own regiment drawn up before him would execute the order, and at the command, one, two, three, fire! he would pay the penalty. A second effort had been made to induce General Johnston to pardon, but he stood firm for discipline and the execution must proceed. Just as the young soldier was being escorted to the ground, one of the general's aid was seen running with lightning speed towards them—the execution was stayed; the commanding general had just received confirmation of the report that General Lee had surrendered, and the poor fellow was saved. Our army encamped around and about Greensboro—our brigade at High Point, N. C., where we stacked our arms for the last time. Sherman and Johnston agreed on a truce on April 18, 1865, and all was over, our pay rolls were furnished us, and our army paid from the specie saved. It was run out from Richmond under guard, and was through the quartermaster of our regiments paid out to us, each receiving a Mexican silver dollar—officers and men sharing alike. I still have my silver dollar and prize it as one of the most valued relics of the war.

After having our arms stacked out in the old field in front of us, which we turned over to the soldiers of Uncle Sam. I began to look around for transportation, so as to aid my men to get home once more, if homes they were fortunate enough to have. With one wagon and the old regimental ambulance, we moved out and in a short time we commenced scattering in different directions; some towards Augusta, and others crossing the river above, and some towards Washington, Ga. Before my separation with the noble men of the Forty-second Georgia, and after calling on the sick and disabled, some of whom had been located near Greensboro, I made the best arrangements for their comfort possible; in some instances leaving nurses with them, and passing amongst them shaking hands, and saying something encouraging to all. My last visit was to my old friend, Moses Martin, who had followed me through the war. "Mose" had fallen in the charge at Bentonville, and now he was minus one leg, which was buried somewhere in North Carolina soil. He was the same Moses Martin that our citizens of Gwinnett honored so long, and he filled the position of doorkeeper for the Legislature many times. Well, there was "Mose" stretched out on his cot; he knew I was to leave him, and when telling him goodbye he looked me in the face, and with a faint smile, and yet with tears in his eyes he said: "Colonel, if I ever get home, and should have a 'boy baby,' I will name him for you," and strange as it may seem, there is a nice young man now living in old Gwinnett, Martin's old home, named "Lovick Thomas Martin."

I had two horses, and complimented my Major, J. J. McCleendon, by giving him one of them, and my bay, a fine, splendid animal, I mounted and departed, sad alone for my home, and my tale is told.

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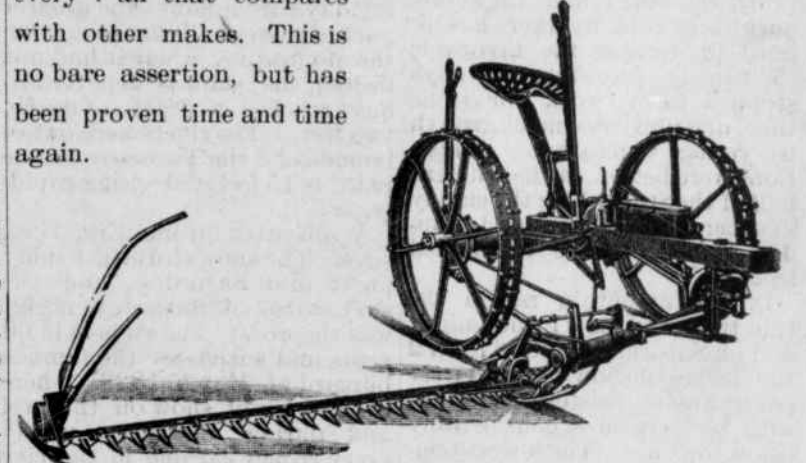
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